

The University and the Future of Democracy – Scholars at Risk 2018 Berlin

More Than Welcome: A Berlin Call for University Ethics

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Democracy is under attack, as are human rights outside and inside the academy, and scholars are at risk. The keynote proposes an ethics that calls on universities to truly welcome these scholars, with more than a benevolent gesture. Instead, the university must be the space for a truly cosmopolitan “education” via exchange among equals – which adds Alexander and Caroline to Wilhelm von Humboldt. This allows an “enlightened and active mind ... to wander freely and widely”, as “one of the joys and rewards of human existence” – which is the version of the United Nations Committee on such human rights. This commitment to safeguard education and academic freedom justifies university autonomy; the way a university deals with scholars at risk is a litmus test of its practice, and its ability to contribute to democracy at all.

At the 2018 Scholars at Risk conference in Berlin, keynotes have addressed academic freedom (Hoodfar) and open inquiry (Butler), social stability and sustainable development (Hilgert). On its last day, there is a need to address the institution that hosts scholars, as the institution that allows for, that empowers and that invests in research and teaching and organizes education: the university. If we understand the role of the university for democracy, we find the institutional answer to the question of what needs to be done when scholars are at risk. Since the current political situation is extremely worrying, it is also a rather urgent Berlin call for university ethics. If needed, it can easily be applied to other institutions responsible for academic affairs.

Three dimensions of Humboldt

My first question is: Do you know Humboldt?

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Indeed, there is a Berlin university that carries the name (and many others, on many continents). Yet the name refers to people: *Familie Humboldt*. Primarily, in discussions of academic work, "Humboldt" is a reminder of *Wilhelm*, the Prussian bureaucrat who started what is now known as the Humboldt model of higher education, implemented in Berlin in 1810.² This concept of higher education is based, notably, on the freedom of those willing to learn to choose your course of studies. It's running mode is the community of scholars and students, thus both learning together in engaging in research, free from economic or political pressure and limitations. Today, we call this academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

However, there is also *Alexander*, the geographer, naturalist and linguist, a foreseer of climate change, and author of *Kosmos*³. He did not only live interdisciplinarity⁴, yet also lived a cosmopolitan life, a gay man eventually countering more than just narrow-mindedness, but colonial mindsets regarding the unknown, the other. Today, we may call this the unbiased search for, still, the truth.⁶

And there is *Caroline* - do never forget the women! She married *Wilhelm*, and – yet, notably already then - led a liberated life.⁷ Like *Alexander*, she did not only travel,

² R. D. Anderson, *Germany and the Humboldtian Model*. 2004

³ In English: *Cosmos. Sketch for a Physical Description of the Universe*. Generally, see Sorkin, David. "Wilhelm Von Humboldt: The theory and practice of self-formation (Bildung), 1791-1810." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44.1 (1983): 55-73. On the brothers, see Geier, Manfred. "Die Brüder Humboldt." *Eine Biographie*. 2009.

⁴ See Cannon, Susan Faye. *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period*. 1978; Jardine, N; Secord, J.A.; Spary, E.C. *Cultures of Natural History*. 1996.

⁵ In regard to the much debated topic of "global citizenship" in the U.S. cf. K. Hovland, *Shared Futures: Global Learning and Liberal Education*, 2006. The term cosmopolitan is used in varied ways by Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, who applies this (older) idea in terms of a philosophy of law; cf. *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, 1784; and which is also referred to by Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideas for an endeavour to define the limits of state action*, 1792. Today, there are several versions of cosmopolitanism, incl. Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*, 2006.

⁶ Certainly, this is the truth and not the Truth, in that it recognizes the challenge in finding consensus on what must be considered real, taking subjectivities and positionalities into account. Yet this does not result in a cynical or nihilist abandonment of the notion, or the search, which seems rather dangerous when populist autocrats claim "facts" to be entirely at their disposal.

⁷ See Hazel Rosenrauch: *Wahlverwandt und ebenbürtig. Caroline und Wilhelm von Humboldt*. 2009; Dagmar von Gersdorff: *Caroline von Humboldt. Eine Biographie*. 2011; Stephan, Inge. "Wahlverwandtschaften. Caroline und Wilhelm von Humboldt in ihren Briefen." *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* (2010): 205-214.

but went places to stay. She also initiated literary salons, the at the time legitimate format to stage debate, organize collective enquiry, contextualize knowledge.⁸

Today, in light of threats to academic freedom and to democracy overall, I suggest to draw inspiration from all three. To engage in and for the university, and to allow for and contribute to democracy, there is a need for all three dimensions they do represent. *Wilhelm* – to understand academic freedom and the university in its democratic function, *Alexander* – to get the cosmopolitan nature of the task, to implement glocalisation in light of globalisation, and *Caroline* – to truly value the academy as a diverse space of exchange among equals.

Why is this important today?

To be very clear, this is not just an argument for pity with people in need. Indeed, it is also not just an argument for solidarity with those who have your job elsewhere and are less comfortable in it. Rather, this is a reminder of the crucial role that universities play in this world, and of our responsibility for it.

Namely, there is an urgent need for proper action because democracy is under attack, including human rights and the institutional arrangements of the rule of law to protect them. This keynote does not allow me to discuss the details. But the strategically well planned attacks by populists, employing the more or less subtle means of autocratic legalism, as well as the outright destruction by means of sheer force do exist, and they are deeply worrying.⁹ Certainly, locations and contexts differ, as does the harm, including the harm to students and scholars.¹⁰ It also

⁸ Hazel Rosenstrauch, *Wahlverwandt und ebenbürtig. Caroline und Wilhelm von Humboldt*. 2009.

⁹ Most worrying, we see attempts to claim the grand and noble terms of a consensus reached around the globe after 1945 and again after 1989, in order to destroy it, i.e. turn “democracy” into “illiberal democracy”, or “law” into a means to destroy legal protection, or “courts” into scapegoats for government interests. There are claims to a “true meaning” of key concepts that guarantee our social fabric, based on peace, and dignity in equal liberty, as respect. This is not intellectually entertaining, and not yet another instance of hegemonic struggle, elites fighting for words, a system destroying itself. Although rather flawed Marxists may get excited about more trouble on the ground still hoping for a revolution, this is either naïve or elitist. Instead, there is an organized attack on democracy and the rule of law, in constitutionalism. See recently, Madeleine Albright: *Fascism: A Warning*, 2018.

¹⁰ Around the world, education is not in good shape. There are students at risk, or already hurt – like the girls abducted by Boko Haram and all the children turned into soldiers or gang members and all

happens outside of as well as inside the academy that activists and journalists and judges and more, as well as scholars and students, are persecuted, threatened, jailed and even murdered. Right now, there are many pressing issues that need to be addressed.

Yet regarding scholars, it is of crucial importance to understand universities and what they can and need to do. Indeed, democracy does rely on universities and on academic freedom in specific ways. It is universities that have a specific role to play in allowing for and defending democracy. Again, be sure to properly define what is meant by this: “democracy”. Yet to defend democracy as a respectful way of the social, we need a deep sense of the university’s glocal nature and need for equality in diversity to fill it.

So let me first address the role of the university today. The argument is that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are key, if properly understood, as requirements of Humboldt’s version of education. As such, the university has a political function, as a factor of democracy. Second, this freedom and this autonomy come with an ethics. Specifically, in an governance mode of modest realism, all universities have an international dimension today, which requires them to be diplomatic going abroad, and true hosts at home, willing and able to interact with the other as an equal. Third, then, hosting scholars at risk is a *litmus test* for universities. You do only pass this test if you allow for, empower, and invest in different voices. Again, the point is that scholars at risk must enjoy more than a gracious gesture. For many reasons, they and their expertise must be truly welcome. And since it draws inspiration from the Humboldt’s and since we are in a city that went through dramatic changes in the world’s history, this is a Berlin call for university ethics.

The role of the university today.

The starting point is that there is an inextricable link between the university and democracy. Certainly, this link does only exist between democracy that deserves its

those starving instead of going to school – deprived of their human right to education. There are teachers at risk, or already fired, or threatened, or killed

name, and a university that lives up to an enlightened understanding of academic freedom and university autonomy. As part of the current problem, this cannot be taken for granted at all.

Regarding democracy, there is an imminent and powerful abuse of the label. What Hungarian President Orbán has labelled “illiberal democracy” is not in need of academic freedom. Nor is a democracy that relies on tweeted news and denies the existence or relevance of facts in need of research. Rather, these representatives of what they still call democracy abuse the concept to destroy it. When politicians win majorities in elections proclaiming “illiberal democracy” or the “true rule of our law”, but elections are manipulated and law is denounced and constitutions are changed into a contradiction in terms and courts are ridiculed, and when “truth” and “facts” and “arguments” become labels for lies, legends, or libel, echoed by powerful people in office and algorithms, all of us have a serious problem. Opposed to these oppressive plans, a democracy that is inextricably related to fundamental human rights, and thus – by the way, not “Western”, but - necessarily liberal, equality and dignity based – to refer to the grand consensus past 45 and past 89 –. Democracy that safeguards this for each and everyone via the rule of law and a separation of powers, does allow for, and in fact need, the university.

However, this does only apply to a university that deserves the name. Regarding academic freedom and the university, there is a similar risk as the one that destroy democracy. Clearly, there are institutions that do not deserve the name. This is the case if a school offers biased or even oppressive training and indoctrination to selected peers, rather than opportunities to think and articulate opinions. Yet other cases are much less clear. When universities become sites of lies instead of truth, of hate instead of speech, of ideology instead of explorative research and teaching, they become sites of battle, or controversy, yet they are not engaged in what defines a university as such.

Namely, and rather prominent in the U.S., but also in other countries, there are speakers that claim a right to “academic freedom”, or a right to “free speech” in universities, in order to, by way of example, call the Holocaust a lie, or discuss human races as fact, inherently unequal, or lecture on women as beings naturally

inferior to men, via brain size, or categorize sexual minorities as sick freaks and aberrations of nature, or present the belief in God's creation as a science, and natural sciences as crap. And to avoid misunderstandings: All of this can be said and written and communicated by other peaceful means as long as it does not harm someone. Since whether we like it or not: This is free speech. But it is not research, or science, interested in truth.

Therefore, if such lies and hate and ideology achieve to be defined as research and teaching, to enjoy academic freedom and the protection of an autonomous university, it is, also, an abuse of the very idea.¹¹ Lies – or alternative facts” - or hate or ideology is not just another approach and topic and result of research, but it is lies and hate and ideology. It may and must be subject to debate, but it is not research and teaching. Instead, these are attempts to capture the space of academic freedom, to in fact destroy it. Note that these people and organisations act based on well funded strategies, and are defended by many more, and attempt to enlist all liberals in that defence, in the name of the human right to free speech, to however denounce women and people of color and other others, as well as critical analysis. Based on the very concept of the university as a site of education, such attempts to rather destroy the university must be refuted.

This is *Wilhelm*.

To understand what the university is about, or should at least attempt to be, in an ever-lasting process of trying, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and this a Berlin idea, is inspiring. In 1810, he conceptualized the university as the place of “Bildung” - a term that carries a meaning beyond its usual translation as “higher education”, since it is a specific type of it: a development of mind and soul towards civic virtues via academic encounter. Famously, he explained to the king “There are undeniably certain kinds of knowledge that must be of a general nature and, more importantly, a certain cultivation of the mind and character that nobody can afford to be without.” But notably, he saw this not only as economically profitable. To add

¹¹ Note that in countries like the U.S., there is a temptation to confuse free speech with academic freedom, for lack of a more refined concept, to be found in international human rights law, or explicitly in German constitutional law.

another Humboldt scholar: Educator and civil rights leader *W.E.B. (for William Edward Burghardt) DuBois* stated in 1902 that “the ideals of education, whether men [sic] are taught to teach or plow, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education must keep broad ideals before it, and never forget that it is dealing with Souls and not with Dollars.” Put this way, dealing with souls defines a university as very specific space.

Now *Wilhelm* promoted higher learning as an asset of a democratic society. Academic freedom of research and freedom of study¹², in the community of scholars and students, in an institution that enjoys corporate autonomy despite their being funded by the state¹³ - to allow for, empower and invest in citizens. This is the link between democracy and the university, if both deserve the name.

In that tradition, as the United Nations phrase it now, higher education in which teaching is grounded in and part of research has “a vital role ... in promoting ... democracy”, beyond the practical, as a human right. Or, in the words of the organization of all states marked as European geographically, the Council of Europe, which runs a project on Education for Democratic Citizens since 1997, “challenges that Europe is facing today – including disenchantment with democracy, integration of refugees and the rise of violent extremism - make education for democratic citizenship and human rights more important than ever”.¹⁴ We need to step up this work in the years to come.

Indeed, the attacks themselves are a striking indicator of why this is necessary. Wherever autocrats are out to destroy a democratic society, as a society that respects all present as equals, and limits majority power by fundamental rights eventually protected by courts, they do attack specific institutions and particular

¹² *Lernfreiheit*, instead of rigid curricula, still defining the difference between Ph.D. studies and a doctorate

¹³ Similar to public broadcasting, state funding of truly autonomous research is a paradoxical and courageous move in that those in power fund those designed for critique.

¹⁴ Commemoration of 20 years, at https://www.coe.int/en/web/edc/home/-/asset_publisher/MmQioA2qaHyO/content/twenty-years-of-promoting-education-for-democracy-and-human-rights?inheritRedirect=false. The Council develops a Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, to support schools with such efforts. There is a continuous effort in the Council of Europe to strengthen such efforts, namely since 2002, including the **Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education from 2010**.

people first, namely: the media, courts, and the university and scholars. As such, what illustrates the nexus between the university and democracy is the relationship between pressure and threats on academics and critical thinking and the presence of non- or antidemocratic forces in any society. The more democracy is at risk, the less academic freedom. Scholars who oppose autocratic regimes and ideologies do report that they were not targeted for being somewhere at a time, but for being academics where critical thought is not wanted. And very often, thinking women are not wanted at all. This has happened in Turkey, and it also characterises the attacks on universities in Hungary or Poland, spiced with antisemitism and racism, with sexism and homophobia, and it is the background of many more battles.

So there is an inherent link between the university and democracy. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are key, if properly understood, in Humboldt's version of education, to a democratic society. As such, the university has a political function, as a factor of democracy.

Against Radical Misunderstandings.

In this concept, and because of the vast array of self-determination universities enjoy, academic freedom and university autonomy come with an **ethics**. In fact, such an ethics informs how a university deals with others, ranging from international partners to hosted scholars at risk.

As with all liberties, freedom and university autonomy shall not be confused with the unlimited use of privilege.¹⁵ This is important because there are not only attempts to abuse the very idea of education and academic freedom and the university as such, but there are also what I would call *radical misunderstandings*, or misconceptions, of this freedom as such.¹⁶ There is no unrestricted freedom and no entirely unlimited liberty in any social setting. Therefore, freedom beyond egocentric autonomy, as a liberty that is socially embedded, in a world in which we

¹⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt believed that a university can and will achieve more (and also different things) than can ever be planned by the state. This also applies to plans made by presidents and rectors, 'professionalised deanships' and other executive committees: there is no such thing as orders, or thoroughly planned success. However, there is good academic governance.

¹⁶ . They are neither new nor do they come from "the enemy".

fundamentally accept each other, carries with it obligations. And whenever it comes to obligations that are attached to freedom, there is certainly the question whether such obligations are in fact a cover up for political intrusion or oppression or censorship or any other inadequate intervention. But different from these, the ethics of the university I want to address are the very foundation academic freedom and the autonomy of the university itself rest upon. Such ethical obligations do not put knowledge and understanding at risk. Rather, there is an ethics to academic freedom that is vital to take the risk away from the academy.

Certainly, this keynote also does not suffice to address all aspects of such an ethics. In the context of scholars at risk, it seems most important to address its international dimension, thus calling on the ethics of universities that are not at risk themselves but reach out to places where scholars are, and that act as host universities and allow scholars at risk elsewhere to stay. Thus, university ethics have at least two sides, as international institutions, reaching out via collaboration and cooperation, as well as inviting in, as receiving ones.

Indeed, internationalisation of universities has mostly been managed as a set of outreach efforts, sending students and scholars abroad, collaborating and cooperating with others in this world. This is *Alexander*, and it is indeed *a wonderful idea to go travel and go explore*. Yet with *Alexander* and with W.E.B. DuBois and so many others, it is also entirely clear that this can fail badly¹⁷, up to a (neo-)colonial encounter. Therefore, we need an ethics to avoid that and properly address when it happens.

There are challenges on the way. In efforts to internationalize universities, conflicts arise and have arisen when a university contracts into partnership with an institution that dismisses scholars based on their political and philosophical views. Conflicts also arise when a university partners with institutions in political contexts

¹⁷ I.e., Peter Scott wrote about the “ugly side to internationalisation” in *The Guardian* 06.06.2011. This term describes “more (high-fee) international students” as the *cash cow* problem, “exotic partnerships which inevitably demand much travelling by senior managers”, or partnerships that involve the awarding of honorary doctorates. It is therefore problematic when the whole situation is referred to as a market, even though economic aspects must be considered. Furthermore, there is also the criticism that internationalisation strategies are nothing more than a superficial myth, false labelling or unsuccessful efforts.

in which the core civil and political human rights are not protected¹⁸. In addition, conflicts arise when cooperation is funded by people or entities that persistently violate human rights. So would you sign an agreement with an institution where religious freedom and homosexuality are denied or discouraged – and what would you do if a student or scholar faces repression while working and studying there?

And there are more questions: Who sets out the definition of education, as well as academic freedom, abroad, and can an international partner ‘censor’ the curriculum or research? When China funds institutes abroad, and Western states fund institutes in China – who runs them, and where does censorship start? More generally, international cooperation already always poses the question of whether this is still a university endeavour that deserves its name. And when should you stand up and protest human rights to be infringed? Note that the ‘bad guys’ like nothing more than collaborating with the ‘good guys’, as it is an excellent way to restore their tarnished reputation, and an opportunity to wash their dirty laundry. By way of example: a German partner tends to ensure that academic freedom appears sparkling white. Therefore, Western universities, faculties and institutes as well as individual scholars are very much sought after, and bribed into cooperating with institutions that use rather than allow for, empower, and invest in science. Thus, reaching out to international partners, in an governance mode of modest realism, requires universities to be diplomatic.¹⁹ Diplomacy is, then, the outreach side of university ethics.

Glocalizing Universities

¹⁸ At Yale, a prominent critic of cooperating with Singapore was philosopher Seyla Benhabib, <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2011/05/18/benhabib-why-i-oppose-yale-in-singapore/>. At NYU, similar debates focus on Abu Dhabi, Zvika Krieger, online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/the-emir-of-nyu-john-sextons-abu-dhabi-debacle/273982/>.

¹⁹ For more, see Baer, Susanne, *Unbounded academic freedom?*, online at www.international.huberlin.de, see *Ferngespraeche*. Diplomacy has a long – and global – history. It is a tool in international relations, not the answer to the questions posed. It relies on people who converse in a shared language, to enable links to other regions of the world, to collect information, to create understanding. Diplomacy relies on ambassadors who are at ease with different cultures, environments and languages; curious and motivated, open and unselfish, tackling common causes for the greater good.

Regarding the other dimension of an international institution, the ethics of a university must make it a really good host. When reaching out across borders must employ all skills developed in diplomacy, to avoid the gunboats as long as possible but take a stand when needed, inviting in does also have an ethics to it. Internationalisation means glocalisation. Here comes *Caroline*.

She adds diversity to the picture. *Wilhelm* designed the institution. *Alexander* travelled the world, a cultural diplomat. And *Caroline* is not only a woman among so many defining men, she also invited people into her salons, to allow for, empower and invest in the fascinating diversity of approaches, understandings, views. Diversity. Now pause for a moment: what does it exactly mean again? If outreach needs diplomacy, inviting people in as a host needs generosity, more than tolerance and respect for the other, but genuine curiosity and appreciation. This asks of us to seriously engage with the unfamiliar – a key ingredient of science.²⁰ If universities want to be true hosts at home, they must be willing and able to interact with the other as an equal.

Now this is not a question of priorities and emphasis and choice. It is also more than a necessity in today's global economy of knowledge. Rather, the commitment to globalisation as glocalisation, in a diplomatic university that is a true host, is a component of academic freedom and university autonomy that deserve the name.

A Litmus Test and a Berlin Call for University Ethics

That much said, the way universities treat scholars at risk is a "litmus test" to their very *raison d'être*, and the test indeed applies to foundations and other such institutions as well. In short, a key to an office and a library card will not do, nor will one lunch and a weekend invitation. Rather, glocalisation in universities must translate into research and teaching. The more universities live up to the ideal of the Humboldtian university, based on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, driven not by money or ideology but by research, the more such institutions must host scholars from abroad as equals. Similar to the status of politically controversial academic fields in universities that challenge an oppressive

²⁰ Nettelbeck, Joachim, former Secretary of Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, FAZ 19.03.2013.

status quo, like gender studies or disability studies, it is a litmus test for universities to host such efforts, if it wants to live up to its institutional calling.

Thus, as much as a university is based on a refined understanding of its function in and for democracy, it allows for, empowers, and invests in scholars at risk. As a result, scholars at risk must enjoy more than a gracious gesture. Glocally thinking, their expertise must be truly welcome. For a start, one could consider to support research that reflects upon the very reasons for the risks, such as autocratic legalism, populism, unfriendly takeovers of liberal institutions and terms, etc. Also, one must systematically address the specific needs of legal status and protection for scholars that need to work abroad because they are at risk at home. Then, every university would profit tremendously from teachings offered on research under pressure, and ways to counter it. Again, the ethics that inform academic freedom and university autonomy must, and may indeed profitably, inform the university's policies.

Inspired by all three Humboldt's, but also thinking at a place that went through dramatic changes in the world's history, this is then a Berlin call for university and other such institution's ethics. With Humboldt and human rights, this call is deeply rooted in Berlin as a city, as the former geopolitical front of the cold war where the symbolic as well as real concrete Wall that came down, in fact: was taken down, in 1989. The call is also very Berlin because it is even more deeply anchored in a post-1945 consensus of "never again" to genocide, to antisemitism, to racism, to fascism in all forms, which were indeed also planned and executed and hailed ... in Berlin. And the call is so Berlin because this appeal is indebted to the concept of the university as an autonomous community of scholars and students, free from state intrusion – attributable to *Wilhelm* - , yet committed to the *Nomos*, to world citizenship – *Alexander* - , and listening beyond prejudice – *Caroline*, all von *Humboldt*.

The key proposition is to counter the risk posed by attacks on democracy, and on universities and academic freedom. Then, the call is for a nuanced diplomacy of a university reaching out. Finally, the call is to, as one element of glocalisation, truly welcome and host scholars at risk, with more than a benevolent gesture. It is the

university that is designed to be, and must strive to stay the space for a cosmopolitan “education” via exchange among equals – which adds, again, Alexander and Caroline to Wilhelm von Humboldt. The university then must be an inclusive space - diverse.²¹ In the words of the United Nations Committee on such human rights, this allows an “enlightened and active mind ... to wander freely and widely”, as “one of the joys and rewards of human existence”.²² This commitment to safeguard education and academic freedom justifies university autonomy; the way a university deals with scholars at risk is a litmus test of its practice, and its ability to contribute to democracy at all. I encourage all of you to work for it.

²¹ Gailda Pitre Davis, *Diversity and Internationalization: Collaborating, Not Just Co-Existing*, 2013 (www.nafsa.org/_/File/_/ti_diversity.pdf); C.L. Olson, R. Evans, R.F. Shoenberg, *At home in the world: Bridging the gap between internationalization and multicultural education*, 2007

²² Well put by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in a document adopted in December 1999. Its work is based on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966, entry into force 3 January 1976, in accordance with article 27.